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Talking or acting? Gender differences in physical activity participation in Israel at the threshold of the 21st century

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Abstract: Lack of physical activity is an important factor that leads to poor health, mortality, and high costs of medical treatment in the Western world. Advances in technology in the past couple of decades have made lifestyles more passive, and have thus affected the population's health. Although the number of Israelis declaring that they participate regularly in physical activity is rising, this number is still lower than in the Western world. The aim of this research is to map the adult Jewish population according to participation in physical activity and attitudes towards physical activity and sport.

Data were collected as part of the International Social Survey Program (ISSP) in 2007 via face-to-face interviews. In the current sample of participants aged 18 years old and above, 1032 interviewees were divided into groups by cluster analysis.

Findings suggest that we cannot refer to the population as a whole, but rather as four different types: a) *athlete at heart* – pro-sport as well as physically active; b) *anti-sport* – holds a negative attitude towards sport and is not physically active; c) *armchair sportsperson* – holds a positive attitude towards sport, but is not physically active; and d) *trendy sportsperson* – an active person who holds a neutral or negative attitude towards sport.

While attempting to characterize the types by gender, the study suggests that women tend to be part of the *anti-sport* and *trendy sportsperson* groups, unlike men who tend to be part of the *athlete at heart* and *armchair sportsperson* groups. At the same time, differences related more to attitudes than behaviour. Men hold positive stances towards sport moreso than women, who participate in physical activity more for instrumental reasons.

Keywords: physical activity, leisure, health, attitudes and behaviour, gender.

Introduction

Lack of physical activity is a significant factor leading to ill health, mortality and high health care costs in Western society. Regular physical activity significantly decreases the risk of heart attack, cancer, diabetes, high blood pressure, obesity, and osteoporosis, among many other diseases. Physical activity reduces tension and depression, increases work productivity, enhances mental and sexual functioning, and slows down the ageing process (Netz et al., 2008).

Despite the fact that the number of Israelis who claim to engage in physical activity on a regular basis has been increasing (according to surveys conducted by the public sports organization (1992-2008)[1] in 2008 some 30% stated that they engaged in physical activity three times a week or more, while in 1992 the figure was only 20%, this rate is low in comparison to the Western world. Technological advances in recent decades have turned our lifestyle into a more convenient and less mobile one, with negative consequences to our health (Scheinowitz et al., 2008). According to the World Health Organization, lack of physical activity accounts for almost two million deaths a year around the world (WHO, 2002). The problem begins at an early age, and the situation has worsened in recent years with prolonged television and computer screen viewing. The annual report published by the Disease Control and Prevention Center in the United States has estimated that encouraging people to lead a more active lifestyle can cut annual medical costs in the States by more than 70 billion dollars (Harvard School of Public Health, 2007). In cost effectiveness terms, similar data indicate that investing one dollar in encouraging physical activity will lead to a profit of more than three dollars in medical care savings. Thus, encouraging physical activity can become a worthwhile investment to the health economy of modern society. In Israel, an increase of a few single percentage figures in the rate of individuals who engage in physical activity can bring about savings of hundreds of millions of shekels (the Israeli currency) a year.

The current study offers an initial mapping of the adult Jewish population according to participation in physical activity and attitudes towards physical activity and sport. In order to map physical activity among the various groups within this population, the various explanations of personal incentives for physical activity must first be described. There are four such categories of incentive: *mission incentives* (pleasure, skill enhancement, the aim to excel), *self-image incentives* (comparison to other people), *social incentives* (belonging and interaction), and *need for external rewards* (social status recognition) (Gray-Lee & Granzin, 1997). According to Netz and Raviv (2003), the contribution of these incentives is not uniform and is affected by various factors, particularly gender. Women attribute greater importance to reducing tension, enhancing physical fitness, flexibility, weight management, and external appearance than men, who attribute a great deal of significance to the competition incentive (Duda, 1989; Finkenberg et al., 1994).

The aim of the current study is to map the Israeli Jewish population in terms of its physical activity as a pastime and its attitudes towards sports, with an emphasis on gender differences.

1 The surveys were conducted by telephone interviews with a sample of 501 interviewees representing the adult Hebrew speaking population (18+) in Jewish settlements in Israel. The current survey findings were compared to earlier survey findings conducted over the past 16 years.

Gender and sport

In the past twenty years, with the consolidation of feminist theories in sport, awareness that sport is a central cultural institution, directly related to gender identity and male hegemony, has increased (Ben-Porat, 2009; Bryson, 1993; Mean, 2001; Parker, 1996). According to these feminist theories, sport creates and recreates ideological support of the superiority of men over women, and glorifies women in fields perceived as contrary to their biological "nature" (Mean, 2001). This ideology draws its justifications from assumptions that attribute fragility and physical and mental weakness to women, thereby assuming that the female body is unable to attain physical feats (Sabo, 1993; Willis, 1982).[2]

The preoccupation with the link between sport and gender has in recent years extended the discussion to a national dimension that the state apparatus and dominant groups in the state have the power in their hands to shape and establish different social assumptions and perceptions, including gender perceptions. The mechanisms employed by the state and the various dominant teams (e.g the elite, the organizations, certain socio-economic or social groups) which serve as social agents shaping national identity (Hobsbawm, 1994) are perceived as central agents in the production and reproduction of gender relations. According to this view, sports organizations and their institutions, which are sponsored by the state, serve as agents that function as tools for the distribution of the ideology that women are inferior and as a means for reproducing women's marginality in sport.

As a result of the significant role sport plays in defining masculinity, clear boundaries between the sexes are maintained by means of trivializing women's sport (Coakley, 2003): sport which integrates male elements such as strength, violence, and dominance over the opposition, is perceived as "real" sport, and sport which expresses grace, gentleness, and coordination, such as dance, is perceived as female and therefore as "non-sport". For this reason, in order to justify their position in competitive sport, which is perceived as male, female athletes produce and reproduce the "male"

2 One of the central explanations for gender differences in physical activity in general, and in activity incentives in particular, is embedded in the various social processes boys and girls undergo throughout their lives. Physical activity and sports take up a significant part of the gender socializing processes (Fejgin, 1994, Haas & Hwang, 2007). Social agents navigate boys to rational and physical directions and girls to affective and aesthetic ones. These perceptions are formed in early elementary school, when boys are encouraged by parents, teachers, and peers to be active in sports, while girls are reinforced for being quiet and ladylike (Greendorfer, 1983; Hay & Donnelly, 1996; Maccoby, 1988). With regard to physical activity, the diverse expectations and demands on boys and girls lead them to maintain traditional gender roles. Thus, for example, girls are encouraged to take part in less physical and more aesthetic sporting activities and boys are expected to participate in sports that require physical force and contact. This phenomenon helps in transcribing the existing gender role distribution. The physical factor, which is at the base of competitive sports, sharpens the biological differences between the sexes and grants men a more favourable position, which is later translated to "natural" superiority in other social fields as well (Kane & Snyder, 1989).

nature of the game by adopting those same practices of aggression, dominance, and control during the game.

The messages transmitted today to female athletes by society contain a double standard: they can engage in male sports, but should continue to behave like ladies in their daily life (Krane et al., 2004; Coakley, 2003). Women who engage in physical activity are thus confronted with a paradox. On the one hand, Western culture presents a model of the ideal female body, and, on the other hand, it presents a model of the ideal athletic body, while both models are connected to typical character traits of femininity and masculinity. As these models do not overlap, the paradox created by the clash between them emerges in the female's experience in sport. In other words, the female athlete realizes that in order to succeed she must adopt traits perceived as male, such as force, assertiveness, independence and competitiveness, while at the same time she must continue to manifest expected hegemonic femininity.

Femininity is a socially structured standard for external appearance, behaviour, and values (Bordo, 1993). Due to the existence of a hegemonic structure of femininity, every body type is attributed a social value formed as a result of comparing it to the female ideal. By means of an entire range of social mechanisms, women learn that "feminine women" are valued more in Western society. Many female athletes, therefore, tend to emphasize directed female performance in their external appearance, and to convey normal sexuality by expressing greater value in maintaining traditional roles – marriage and motherhood – over engaging in sport (Clasen, 2001). The accepted perception is that female athletes who remain true to their "real gender" form the appropriate and desired image of women in sport.

Notwithstanding, a background report submitted to the Advancement of Women Committee in Israel in 2002, which examined women's sports coverage in the media and the representation of women in sport, found that no procedures or standards apply to women's sports coverage that would oblige sports sections to reach a certain coverage quota on television (state or commercial channels) or in the press. As a result, the extent of media coverage of Israeli female athletes is significantly lower than that awarded to Israeli male athletes. In those cases when female Israeli athletes do get extensive coverage, they are often represented in a negative light with an emphasis on gossip and personal and athletic failures (Bernstein & Galily, 2008).

Method

Description of Sample

Data were gathered within the framework of the ISSP (International Social Survey Program), whose aim is to conduct an international comparative study by means of surveying views in various countries, under the strictly controlled research tools and data collection methods. Data were gathered in 2007 by surveyors trained in the face-to-face method, conducted at the interviewees' home, among a representative sample of the adult Jewish Israeli population (over 18). The sample consisted of 1032 interviewees: 53% women and 47% men. The mean age was 47.3 (median 46). The aver-

age years of education was 12.95 (median 12). Approximately 23% of the interviewees were single, 57% were married or living with a life partner, and 20% were divorced, separated or widowed. The average gross income per household was 8437 NIS (median 7000 NIS).[3]

Analysis

In order to answer the central question of this study, that is, how can the adult Jewish population be divided into groups according to attitudes on sports activities and engagement in physical activity, a cluster analysis was conducted. Cluster analysis is intended to divide a population into groups that differ from one another in the variables examined, while within the group homogeneity of these attributes is maintained. Seven variables[4] were entered in the analysis, which was conducted by ten iterations. As a result of the analysis, interviewees were divided into four distinct groups.

Findings

Findings of the cluster analysis are presented in table 1.

Table 1. Cluster analysis findings. Division of the respondents into groups according to views on sports activities and engagement in physical activity, Averages, and F-values

Cluster	Means					
	Athlete at heart	Anti-sport	Armchair sportsperson	Trendy sportsperson	F	sign
N	227	322	140	343	d.f. (3;1028)	
To what extent is your physical or mental health a reason for engaging in sport? (Scale 1-4)	3.70	2.93	3.30	3.49	45.6	.000
To what extent is your appearance a reason for engaging in sport? (Scale 1-4)	3.15	2.64	3.1	3.02	15.4	.000
View: Participating in sports develops a child's character. (Scale 1-5)	4.49	3.99	4.43	4.18	18.7	.000
To what extent are you proud when Israel succeeds in a sports competition or an international game? (Scale 1-4)	3.66	2.95	3.67	2.99	50.6	.000
How frequently do you engage in physical activity such as sports, fitness room, walking, etc.? (Scale 1-5)	4.1	1.09	1.28	3.93	2090.4	.000
How frequently do you watch sport events on TV? (Scale 1-5)	3.93	1.11	3.71	1.28	1668.3	.000

3 The general sample included another 313 Arab interviewees, however, this study focused only on the Jewish population.

4 Because the study found particular significance in the item "frequency of engaging in physical activity", it was decided that this variable would be granted more weight in the analysis. For this reason it was entered twice in analysis, while the other variables were entered only once.

As table 1 indicates, the greatest distinction between the various groups (according to F values) was found for engaging in physical activity and attending sports events. Those who belong to the first cluster engage in physical activity very frequently, watch sports events somewhat frequently, attribute much importance to engaging in physical activity for physical and mental health and for appearance, agree to a great extent that taking part in sports develops a child's character, and are very proud when Israel succeeds in sport competitions or international games. We termed this cluster the "athlete at heart" type.

Those who belong to the second cluster do not engage in physical activity, do not watch sport events, and attribute less importance to engaging in physical activity for physical and mental health and appearance than the other clusters. Those who belong to this cluster agree less than the others that participating in sports develops a child's character and are more indifferent than clusters 1 and 3 to Israel's success in sport competitions or international games. We termed this cluster the "anti-sport" type.

Those who belong to the third cluster do not engage in physical activity, but watch sports events very frequently. They attribute much importance to engaging in physical activity for physical and mental health and appearance, agree to a great extent that sports develop a child's character and are very proud when Israel succeeds in sport competitions or international games. We termed this cluster the "armchair sportsperson" type.

Those who belong to the fourth cluster tend to engage in physical activity very frequently, but watch sports events infrequently. They tend to agree that engaging in sports is beneficial to maintaining physical and mental health and appearance. They agree less that participating in sports develops a child's character, and are more indifferent to Israel's success in sport competitions or international games in comparison to clusters 1 and 3. We termed this cluster the "trendy athlete" type.

From the distribution of the interviewees in the various clusters (Figure 1), the two main types that stand out are the "trendy athlete" and "anti-sports" types. Approximately one third of the interviewees belong to each of these groups. Approximately 22% of the interviewees belong to the "athletes at heart" type and 14% belong to the "armchair sportsperson" type.

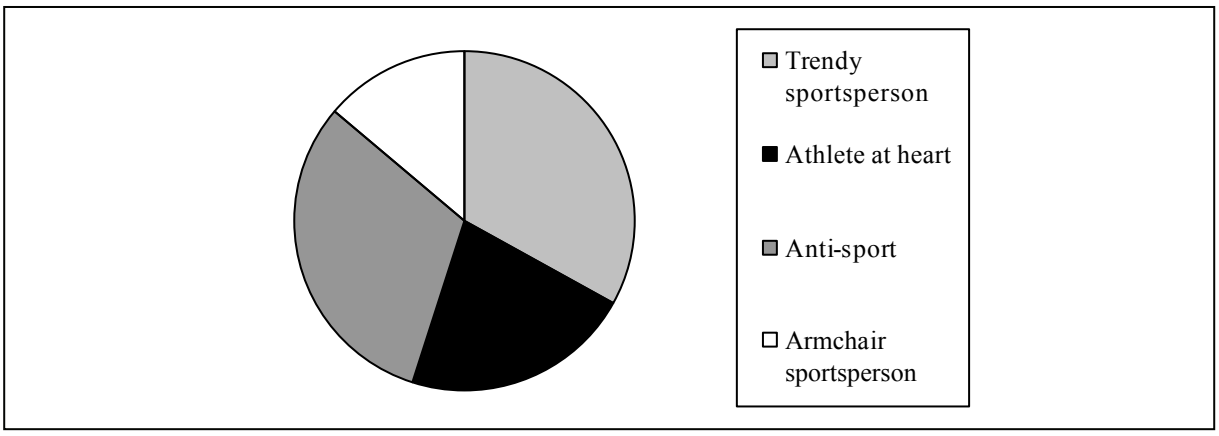

Figure 1. Different types by participation (N=1032)

Nevertheless, the picture changes when the distribution of the clusters to which interviewees belong is examined by gender (Figure 2). Highly significant differences were found between the genders in terms of the clusters to which they belong (Cramer's V= .41**; χ^2 (3; 1028) = 175.0**). Women tend to belong to the "anti-sports" and "trendy athlete" types more than men, while men tend to belong to the "athlete at heart" and "armchair sportsperson" types more than women – both types are a mirror reflection of the other.

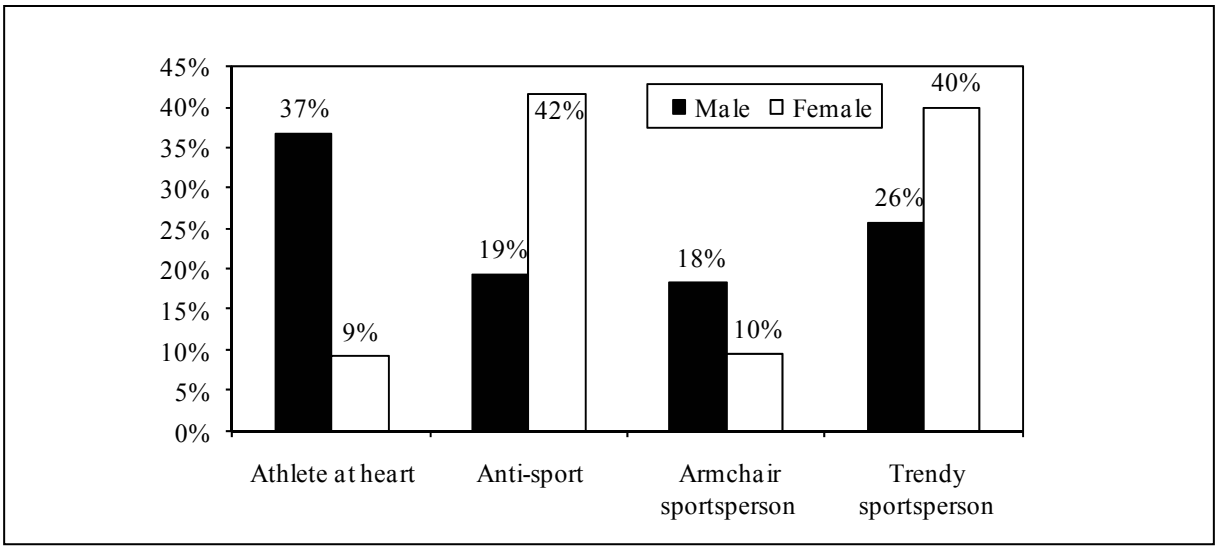

Figure 2. Types by gender (N=1032)

Discussion

The research findings indicate that all those who engage in physical activity cannot be placed under the same umbrella. In the current study we have mapped the adult Jewish population in terms of physical activity as a pastime and by its attitudes towards sports. The research findings present four distinct types. According to the findings, the "athlete at heart" type not only holds positive views of sports, but also in practice engages in physical activity as a pastime. The "anti-sports" type is also characterized by the correspondence between his or her views and his or her behaviour in practice: negative views of sports and lack of physical activity in practice. On the other hand, the "armchair sportsperson" type is characterized by holding positive views of sports activity, and even enjoying the activities as a spectator; yet this individual usually does not engage in physical activity itself. Conversely, although the "trendy athlete" does not hold positive views of sports, this individual engages in physical activity on a regular basis.

In accordance with the essence of the types that emerged, each one can be linked to the four incentives mentioned earlier: mission, self-image, social, and need for external rewards. Thus, it can be assumed that the "athlete at heart" type is forcefully driven by mission and social incentives, while the "trendy athlete" type is driven by external rewards and self-image incentives. It can also be assumed that the "armchair sportsperson" type is characterized by social incentives, but at an insufficient level for

engaging in physical activity in practice. We assume that for the "anti-athlete" type, the four incentives either exist at a low level or are non-existent.

By characterizing the types in terms of gender, a significant difference arises between men and women. Women tend to belong to the "trendy athlete" and "anti-sports" types, while men tend to belong to the "athlete at heart" and "armchair sportsperson" types. It can be noted that the differences between men and women lie in their views of physical activity more than in their engagement in the activity itself. Men in our study hold more positive views of sports, while women expressed less positive views. These findings are consistent with other studies, which claim that women attribute greater importance to self-image and external rewards incentives, while men attribute greater importance to mission and social incentives, such as competitiveness and belonging to a group (see, for example, Ashford et al., 1993).

Newer findings (Kilpatrick et al., 2005) relating to gender indicated that men are more highly motivated by performance and ego-related factors, such as challenge, strength and endurance, competition, and social recognition, when compared to women, regardless of activity type.

The differences in incentives can be accounted for by gender differences in the socialization process of physical activity. For boys, participation in sports, exercise, and physical activity is consistent with society's definition of masculinity and is reinforced, emphasized, and encouraged by the attitudes of parents, teachers, coaches, and peers (Haas & Hwang, 2007; Greendorfer, 1983; Hay & Donnelly, 1996). As studies continue to point to gender differences in socialization processes, which shape views and behaviours in the field of sports (Vilhjalmsson & Kristjansdottir, 2003), changes with far-reaching consequences cannot be expected in these areas in the near future. Therefore, against the background of instrumental incentives, fulfilled by alternative means (such as plastic surgery and crash diets), it can be assumed that there is a risk that women will decrease or even cease their physical activity. In other words, as a result of such alternative means, women will manage to lose weight and enhance their appearance, while the health benefits of physical activity will not be achieved.

In order to minimize these consequences, a change in incentives, especially among women, is needed. Central socialization agents should act to promote achievement, competition and social incentives to engage in physical activity in both genders and not only among men.

We claim that since learning roles and internalizing expectations begin in childhood and accompany an individual at almost every stage of his or her life, a similar attitude towards boys and girls in the field of sports and physical activity at a young age by central socialization agents (family, teachers, peers and the media) can blur the distinctions at a later age that were found in this study.

There is no doubt that this issue requires further investigation. It is our hope that this study will assist those who work towards encouraging physical activity, and thus contribute to a better understanding of the differences of engaging in physical activity among a part of the population in Israel.

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